

TESTIMONY OF FRANK TAMBORELLO
HUNGER ACTION LOS ANGELES
Farm Bill Listening Session, LA County July 12, 2006

Good morning. I am Frank Tamborello and I've been an organizer and advocate with the Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger & Homelessness for nine years and now moving on to Hunger Action Los Angeles. Thank you for hearing my testimony.

I am in contact personally or over the telephone with at least 200 people a year who are looking for food resources. They are dealing with hunger. One of the highest priorities in the Farm Bill should be ending hunger in the United States. It's good that the nutrition programs are one of the topics here for L.A. County because we are the county with the largest number of food stamp participants in the country. And yet still only a little more than half the persons qualified for food stamps are getting them. Access to food stamps definitely needs to be improved.

On the state and local level we have used a lot of options and initiatives that have improved food stamp participation somewhat. I believe that in the farm bill we have to look at the elephant in the room, or should I say the mouse in the room because it is so small. That is the Thrifty Food Plan, the basis for the food stamp allotments. Food stamp allotments need to be increased, across the board. We understand that the food stamp program is only intended as a supplement and not someone's entire diet. But the Thrifty Food Plan was formulated before rents in Los Angeles hit an average of over \$1,000 a month. The cost of living increases for food stamps haven't kept up with the cost of housing, child care and especially now gasoline.

In LA County we have a lot of vehicle-dependent workers who cannot rely on public transportation to get to their jobs because the bus or train doesn't go close to where they need to go. They are struggling to make ends meet because of fuel costs and even with food stamps, they are running out of food with a week or two left in the month.

I've talked to people who are \$5 over the food stamp limit and so they're looking for a food pantry, people who have just left welfare but are paying hundreds of dollars a month in child care, seniors who are paying their entire pension in rent and can only qualify for \$10 worth of food stamps. We need to overhaul the Thrifty Food Plan and increase food stamp allotments beyond the scheduled annual increase.

I have only one detailed suggestion, which is to increase the minimum food stamp allotment from \$10 to \$25. Besides that, any increase beyond the standard can only help. I know this could be calculated at billions of dollars but the current administration seems to have proved that if there's a will there's a way. It's about time money was invested in the health and nutrition of all Americans.

The USDA has been good at pushing a message of health and fruit and vegetable consumption. We would like to see that tied in closer with the Food Stamp program, but there may be more concrete results by taking a look at what commodities are distributed through Emergency Food Assistance Program and Commodity Supplemental Food Program, and revising them in accordance with nutrition standards. Through those commodities there can be a more direct impact made in getting healthier food to vulnerable populations. We would also like to see the WIC and Senior Farmer's Market Coupon programs continued.

We're concerned about money in agricultural appropriations going to places that aren't appropriate. Maybe we should call them inappropriations. For example, according to a recent article in the Washington Post:

"Nationwide, the federal government has paid at least \$1.3 billion in subsidies for rice and other crops since 2000 to individuals who do no farming at all, according to an analysis of government records by The Washington Post.

Some of them collect hundreds of thousands of dollars without planting a seed. Mary Anna Hudson, 87, from the River Oaks neighborhood in Houston, has received \$191,000 over the past decade. For Houston surgeon Jimmy Frank Howell, the total was \$490,709. "

---By Dan Morgan, Gilbert M. Gaul and Sarah Cohen
The Washington Post , Sunday 02 July 2006

It's amazing to me that we can continue to pay out these subsidies to non-farmers on surgeon's income, but the minimum food stamp allotment is still \$10 for someone who has trouble paying rent. These subsidies may be legal but in a very real sense they constitute fraud and I believe they should be ceased and have the money redirected to fighting hunger and promoting access to nutritious food.

We hope the USDA can recognize and promote local agriculture in the next Farm Bill. We have a thriving community garden scene here in Los Angeles, all the more amazing when you consider the scarcity of available land. More and more people grow some of their own food as they learn that it's possible. I believe that when educated about the difference between locally grown food and food shipped from thousands of miles away, many people start going to the local farmer's market. We would like to see funding and real support go to encouraging local growing, packaging and distribution of food. In this way we can also contribute to saving fuel costs and decreasing global warming as well as making connections between urban eaters and rural growers.

We have time ahead of us to make more suggestions on the Farm Bill. But on behalf of the people I see and know and talk to who are either living on the street or under constant threat of eviction, and who are relying on charitable food distribution, I would like to summarize my suggestions today:

Boost the food stamp program allotments across the board, and increase the minimum allotment to \$25:
Preserve immigrant eligibility for the program:
Promote health in choosing foods for the EFAP and CSFP programs:
End subsidies going to non-farmers:
Promote local agriculture.

Thank you very much.

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